

Are You Ready for Fourth of July Emergencies?

Find out how you can educate clients about the dangers of fireworks and ways to keep pets safe during family celebrations.

By Wendy S. Myers



During last year's busy Fourth of July holiday, a frantic family brought their Golden Retriever to Central Veterinary Emergency Services in Englewood, Colo. The dog had fetched a smoldering firework that caused painful thermal and chemical burns in its mouth. The excitement of fireworks and family outings can often lead to pet emergencies, cautions Sam Romano, DVM, of Central Veterinary Emergency Services.

"The most common injuries we see during the Fourth of July weekend are trauma and lacerations," he says. "Animals get lacerations by climbing over fences or jumping through windows or doors to escape the fireworks. When they flee, we also see more hit by cars."

As warm temperatures and holiday weekends lure families and pets outdoors, you can educate clients about precautions for safe celebrations. Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Fourth of July are the top three holidays for pet emergencies at Central Veterinary Emergency Services. Dr. Romano sees more emergencies during summer months due to outdoor activities where pets run loose and may get injured or ill from eating garbage, swimming in lakes and ponds, running in wooded areas, and overreacting to rousing environments.

To prepare clients for safer summer activities and holidays, you can publish an article in your clinic newsletter, record a tip for your message-on-hold announcement, and talk with clients in exam rooms. Each year, the American Animal Hospital Association sends a news release on Fourth of July safety tips for pets to media nationwide. Follow this advice to bring smiles rather than stitches to summer celebrations:

1. Recommend identification tags and microchips. Frightened dogs may climb a fence or run away to escape the noise of fireworks or shrill screams of playing children. Cats may seek refuge in confined spaces such as under porches, crawl spaces, basement windowsills, vents, or even inside interior walls. "Cats may literally climb the walls with fear," Dr. Romano says. "When cats hide behind walls or ceiling tiles, they are difficult to reach and rescue."

While fleeing to safety, pets may face the reality of never reuniting with their families. More than 50 percent of dogs and 75 percent of cats are without collars by the time they arrive at animal shelters. Besides encouraging clients to have pets wear ID tags—even indoor only cats—you can discuss the permanent identification that a microchip offers. Explain that most veterinary hospitals and animal shelters have scanners that reveal the unique ID code for the pet and can call a toll-free number to get the family’s contact information.

2. Keep pets away from all fireworks. Place pets in a crate in a quiet area where they won’t hear fireworks. If the kennel is within earshot of explosions, the pet may claw or chew at the bars trying to escape the safety of its cage. Dr. Romano recommends a basement or interior room where sounds are muffled. Once the fireworks show ends, dispose of fragments in a bucket of cold water until it’s safe to throw them away. Store garbage and extinguished fireworks in a waste container with a lid that a dog or cat can’t remove.

3. Tell clients to watch for signs of pets’ stress. Dogs may exhibit excessive panting, drooling, nervousness, hyperactivity, and won’t lie down or respond to commands, Dr. Romano



says. Cats may pant and salivate but are more likely to become reclusive. Talk with clients in advance about whether sedatives are appropriate for their pets. A low dose of Ace Promizine when safely prescribed may reduce the pet’s stress, Dr. Romano says.

“Clients should obtain tranquilizers well in advance if their pets will need them,” he cautions. “We get a lot of calls on the Fourth of July for tranquilizers, but it’s too late because the pet is already hyperactive.”

4. Explain other outdoor risks. Pets may be susceptible to heat stroke, swimming injuries, pad lacerations, skin and ear infections, or gastrointestinal problems from eating garbage or too many table scraps. Remind clients to always have cool water available for pets to drink. Explain the signs of heat stroke and the importance of spraying the pet with cool water to reduce the body temperature and seeking help from a veterinarian immediately.

5. Give advice on what to do in case of an emergency. Recommend items to include in a pet first-aid kit and show clients how to apply pressure to a wound. Always recommend they seek help from the nearest veterinary hospital rather than treating pets’ injuries themselves. If your hospital is closed holidays and evenings, help clients quickly find your referring emergency

clinic with a message-on-hold announcement and post a phone number and map of the emergency hospital on your front door.

Most importantly, contact the client after a pet's emergency so you can provide follow-up treatment as the primary care veterinarian as well as evaluate the service that your referring emergency clinic provides. By preparing clients and emphasizing prevention, you and your patients will have a safe Fourth of July.

Resources to Help You Prepare for Animal Emergencies

- American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care, James N. Ross Jr., DVM, executive secretary; phone (508) 839-7950; james.ross@tufts.edu.
- Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Society; phone (210) 698-5575; www.veccs.org
- *A Pet Owner's Guide to Common Small Animal Poisons* is available online from the American Veterinary Medical Association at www.avma.org/pubhlth/poisingde.asp.
- Toxnet, a cluster of databases on toxicology, hazardous chemicals, and related areas, is available from the National Library of Medicine at <http://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/>.
- *Emergency Procedures for the Small Animal Veterinarian* (W B Saunders Co., 2000); (800) 545-2522; www.wbsaunders.com.
- *Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Manual* (Lifelearn, 1998); (800) 375-7994; www.lifelearn.com.
- *Small Animal Emergency and Critical Care: A Manual for the Veterinary Technician* (W B Saunders Co., 2001); (800) 545-2522; www.wbsaunders.com.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.